Manzanar: A Community of Contradictions

Although Manzanar was enclosed in barbed wire and guarded by armed MPs, it resembled a typical American community for the Nisei, and for the Issei it became a community with traditional Japanese attributes. Internees of both generations were intent on recreating a semblance of normalcy. For the Nisei this meant proving they were Americans. Sue explained: “Kids wouldn’t speak Japanese. Many felt that they should not be involved in anything Japanese. We were American. Public schools really did a good job in Americanizing us. Manzanar became a very American city because that’s what we knew.”

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in Our World, the Manzanar High School Yearbook of 1943–44. In the forward is this explicit statement: “Since that first day when Manzanar High School was called into session, the students and faculty have been trying to approximate in all activities the life we knew ‘back home.’ With the publication of this yearbook, we feel that we have really come closer to our goal.” The photos of the graduating seniors are similar to those in other high school yearbooks, even though 168 faces are Japanese.

One, however, is not, the photo of Ralph Lazo. Sue told Lazo’s remarkable story.

He’s Mexican American. He was going to school with Nisei at Belmont [High School] and associated with them all the time. Without telling anybody, he registered [for evacuation] with the Japanese Americans. His mother had passed away, and he told his dad he was going to camp with his friends. The day the train left L.A. he got on and was going from one car to the next pretending to say good-bye.
He was still on the train when they got to Lone Pine. They couldn’t believe it when he said: “I decided to come with you.” His father was very upset, of course, when he found out that it was not a summer camp. They kept him at Manzanar. He spoke a little Japanese, but, still, I don’t know why they allowed him to stay. Even the Issei accepted that he belonged there. They thought he was an orphan and put candy under his pillow. He stayed until he was drafted into the Army in 1944.3

Ralph Lazo was a contradiction that emphasized a community built on contradictions. In some aspects Our World is an example of a classic American high school annual with photos of girls in cheerleader attire, students in band practice, and in theatrical productions, sports, dances, even a Spanish Club. When the publication extends its descriptions to the larger Manzanar community, the ironies are pronounced. A section entitled “democracy in action” reveals the control the WRA exerts on the “community government.” An article on industry and agriculture, stressing that the internees must produce much of their own food and clothing, refers to the community alteration shop, which alters GI clothing to fit internees. Then there is the uncaptioned photo on the last page of the guard tower looming over a bleak landscape.

The establishment of The Manzanar Cooperative Enterprises promoted the Americanization of the camp. “The government wanted the camps to be self-sufficient,” Sue said, “so they set up the Cooperative.” Cooperative members, charged five dollars each, participated in the earnings of the enterprise. A canteen/general store offering merchandise not provided by the WRA carried items that were in constant demand. The canteen sold newspapers, periodicals, smoking supplies, candy, soft drinks, ice cream, and sunglasses. The general store sold toys, fabric, clothing, and shoes.4 But the ability to purchase merchandise associated with pre-interment life was limited. “Only the ones who worked had money to spend in the canteen or the store, and they had very little,” Sue said. “We didn’t get paid very much, either eight or 12 dollars a month.” Sue pointed out another irony: “The administration argued that we were getting our room and board free.5 There was terrible financial insecurity. We made do with what we had.”

Sue told one very appealing story about trying to approximate life as it was “back home.” Given the limitations of Manzanar, it reveals something of the audacity of Hideo Kunitomi.

My brother bought a pair of Florsheim shoes that he ordered from somewhere. I don’t know how he had the money for that. He was furious because they ruined them at the co-op shoe repair shop by putting on the wrong kind of heel. I don’t know why he wanted a pair of fancy shoes like that to wear around camp. Maybe they made him feel better about himself. Maybe he thought he would make a hit with the girls.6